

# Talk to the Best Source: Your Employees

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I am a business consultant by trade. But, often I tell my clients that their best consultants already work for them. Their existing staff has a huge reservoir of knowledge and innovation that can move the business forward.

Think about it. To most customers and suppliers, your employees *are* your business. They are the front line of interaction – of sales – of satisfaction – and therefore the front line of profit.

No one knows what your customers want more than your employees. They field the questions and answer the complaints. They know what turns customers on, and more importantly, what turns them off. Asking your employees about customer desires and satisfaction gets to the root of the situation much better than surveys or research.

Your employees also understand how your business *really* works, regardless of what the manual says. They know what improvements are needed and how to make them happen.

Why don't your employees volunteer these ideas themselves?

- Fear – Most employees are afraid to speak up. They think no one will listen to them. They fear that others will laugh at ideas that don't pan out or that their supervisor will resent their intrusion. They fear that the other employees will not take kindly to their standing out.
- Value – They don't feel incentivized to help you. "What's in it for me?" is a basic attitude common to all of us.
- Apathy – They don't believe you care about their ideas. They don't want to step on your toes.
- Ignorance – They may not know enough or you may believe that they don't know enough. You may not want to trust that they can have worthwhile ideas and so don't share your needs. Employees can't help with a problem they don't know about.
- History – Your employees remember innovations that didn't work and don't want to be associated with another one. This is true especially if the aftermath of a previous failure included job loss for the idea makers.

How do you mitigate these barriers?

- Communicate – "Location, location, location" is a key to business success. "Communicate, communicate, communicate" is the key to employee relationship success. Your staff needs to know that you care about their ideas and that they need not fear bringing them forth to help the business. You don't need an anonymous suggestion box, but simply to accept suggestions and be open about the process of evaluation.
- Instruct – Each employee doesn't have the full picture. You must ensure that the team of employees involved in innovations knows about the business processes in that area. They work with processes, materials, schedules, money and people every day. You just need to give them a little help in understanding the bigger picture.
- Involve – People respond more easily to what they grow, not what is forced upon them. Involving the employees in the process of evaluation, prioritizing and implementing innovations will ensure that all the staffers are on the same side and are not adversaries.

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- Trust – Many innovations require consideration of expenses and budgets. You need to trust your employees with the appropriate level of this information. They probably know more about the company finances than you think.
- Respond – Nothing kills ideas as much as lack of response. If ideas are ignored, possible improvement is lost and the innovator loses interest in bringing forward any others. You need to respond positively to the effort.
- Experiment – You will succeed only if you actually try some of the proposed innovations. They won't all work out and the ones that do work out won't succeed immediately. Your customers will understand and appreciate that you are trying to improve their experience, even if it means taking risks.
- Celebrate – It's important to celebrate "failures" as well as successes. Each employee needs to understand that success starts with the process, not the product. Once you celebrate an experiment that didn't turn out so well, it primes the pump for others because the staff sees that they need not fear failure.

Following these steps leads to success. One side effect is employee buy-in. If a new idea or process is imposed upon a staff, often their first response is to fold their arms and grouse about how "those people" don't understand how the business really works. If the employees have contributed to the innovation, however, they will work extra hard to make it a success.

So, the next time you step onto the business floor, try to see all your employees as top level consultants. Maybe there are no power suits, ties or leather briefcases, but the people you've already hired are the best source for business improvement and success.

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